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ABSTRACT

This study examines and supports the hypothesis that diverse student behavior can be meaningfully and usefully construed when viewed from the single perspective described here as hedonism vs. the Protestant Ethic. Subjects were 1375 male and female undergraduate students. Anonymous questionnaires dealing with background, academic life, social and sexual behavior, drug use, and help seeking, were collected during three successive academic years. Six comparable data sets were derived from the questionnaires, one for each sex in each of the three years. Each data set contained 42 variables per subject, and data from each set were treated separately. Product moment correlations were calculated from all complete data pairs, and the six resulting correlation matrices were factor analyzed using a principal components procedure. The six sets of first factor loadings proved highly consistent with each other. Associated with the hedonic end of this dimension are higher frequencies of sexual behavior and drug usage. Students who tend toward the traditional end of this dimension report opposite behavior patterns. Little change is observed within each sex over the three year period, but some sex differences exist. Conceptual simplicity and utility are offered by this unidimensional schema.
(Author/JLL)

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# Hedonism vs. the Protestant Ethic: A useful dimension for understanding student behavior

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Efforts to construe individual differences in behavior by using a small number of dimensions, either theoretically or empircally derived, have long characterized the field of personality research. Many well known conceptual schemas have been offered as having a wide range of utility with respect to both persons and situations, while recent efforts to develop descriptive or predictive models have often focused on a limited behavioral domain or a restricted target population. Examples of this latter approach, with its limited range of application, may be found in the work on college student behavior.

The many studies of student behavior have typically cited between four and nine more-or-less independent dimensions, although some researchers have reported up to two dozen presumably meaningful factors. While these multifactor approaches may be highly sophisticated, they often fail to meet the demand of parsimony or satisfy the requirement that a conceptual framework be easily understood and utilized by non-professional personnel. A simplified typology of college student subcultures, developed by Clark and Trow (1966), has proven to be one of the most useful of its kind, and has served as the catalyst for numerous other studies. Although operational measures of the four Clark-Trow orientations--academic, collegiate, non-conformist and vocational--have been developed, recent investigations have suggested the factorial complexity of even this model (Doucet, 1977).

Efforts have also been made to construe student behavior in terms of a single variables. Simmons and Winograd (1966), as well as Suchman (1968), have suggested that the behavior of many students could be understood in terms

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of their adherence to a "hang-loose ethic." This value system is characterized by a purposeful non-conformity, a repudiation of most traditional values and a directed assault on the American middle-class establishment. While perhaps useful in explaining the behavior of a small number of students at a particular time in our history, this model seems less useful as a proactive motivational schema, and its applicability in the present era of college students is dubious.

For about six years, Paul Perez and I have been investigating college student behavior in an effort to make sense of the great diversity of life patterns which we observe, and to develop a less complex conceptual tool which could be used in our consultations with non-psychologists. We took our direction from an earlier study (Lester, Perez and Zohner, 1973) in which we predicted, and found, that the academic, social and sexual behavior of college students who abstained from marijuana use differed markedly from the behavioral patterns reported by marijuana users. We observed, in that study, that marijuana users engage more frequently in all forms of sexual activity, are less concerned with work and achievement in the college's academic program, are more likely to experience academic, social and emotional problems, and manifest a rejection of traditional values in many behavioral spheres which we examined. In contrast, the behavior of non-users conformed closely to the traditional values of the Protestant ethic. Such students are more involved with, and do better in, their academic work, are less likely to engage in sexual activities, use alcohol more temperately, are more law abiding, and display a general acceptance of the dominant cultural norms. These findings have been sustained by numerous reports of significant motivational and behavioral differences between marijuana users and non-users. We tentatively suggested, in that study, that the behavior of college students could be usefully construed in terms of a single dimension -- the student's degree of orientation toward either a "hedonic" implicit value system, in which behavioral alternatives are evaluated primarily in terms of the amount of pleasure to be gained and pain to be avoided in each, or an implicit

value system based on the Protestant Ethic of hard work, achievement and delay of gratification.

It should be noted that at the time of our initial investigation, we selected marijuana use as a target behavior because of its high salience in the student population, and because of its demonstrated relationship to other behavioral variables. The choice of marijuana use as an index of student values was not felt to be critical. We believed that any variable of student behavior which offered a choice between a work-achievement ethic and a hedonic value could be used with almost equal facility to discriminate between the more traditionally oriented students and their hedonically oriented peers. In further research efforts (Perez & Lester, 1975) we examined and observed meaningful developmental and Zeitgeist influences in many of the behavioral variables which defined this dimension.

With these results in hand, we embarked on an effort to directly test the utility of the implicit value system as an explanatory concept without focusing on any one specific behavioral referent. We hypothesized that the first factor item loadings on a questionnaire covering a wide variety of student behavior would be consistent with an interpretation in terms of the student's degree of orientation toward either a traditional or a hedonic implicit value system. It was further predicted that the obtained factor structure would sustain the internal consistency of student behavior patterns when viewed from this perspective. As compared with traditionally oriented students whose behavior should reflect the values of the Protestant Ethic, students with a hedonic value system were expected to report a higher incidence of drug usage and sexual behavior, be less serious about their academic programs, and view the challenges of their college experience more negatively. They should also be more likely to experience academic and personal difficulties, and display generally non-traditional, egocentric and hedonistic behavior patterns.

## PROCEDURE

The subjects were undergraduate students at a coeducational liberal arts college in rural New England. The analyses described here were based on 1375 usable questionnaires collected during three successive academic years ending in 1974. The sample, 46% male and 54% female, represented approximately one third of the total college enrollment in each year.

Anonymous questionnaires dealing with background, academic life, social and sexual behavior, drug use and help seeking, were placed in the major campus buildings during the last months of each academic year and collection boxes were provided for completed questionnaires at these same locations. Acceptance of the questionnaire was completely voluntary, and total anonymity was guaranteed by the unrestricted distribution and collection of the research instruments. Key items were included which permitted the exclusion of questionnaires which were patently fraudulent or which contained serious internal inconsistencies. Also included were questions measuring known parameters of the population; this enabled us to verify that our sample was indeed representative of the student population during the period under study. Six comparable data sets were derived from the questionnaires, one for each sex in each of the three years of the study. Each data set contained 42 variables per subject, and the data from each set were treated separately. Product moment correlations were calculated from all complete data pairs, and the six resulting correlation matrices were factor analyzed using a principal components procedure. The 42 variables which we examined are noted in Table 1, and are described there in terms of the hedonic end of our model. We were quite wary of the tendency of factor analyses to reflect no more than the built-in biases of the questionnaire items themselves, and so made a careful effort to include items representative of the most significant aspects of student behavior. However, we did not attempt to sample every possible aspect of college student behavior, as this was not required for a meaningful test of our hypothesis.

## RESULTS

The six sets of first factor loadings which were obtained are highly consistent with each other. The first factors account for eleven to thirteen percent of the total variance in each group. Of 249 factor loadings obtained, 86% are both statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence, and consistent in sign with the direction predicted from our hypothesis. Only three statistically significant loadings deviate in direction from our predictions.

As indicated by these first factor loadings, which may be seen in Table 2, a moderate to strong association is observed among most of the variables under study. Associated with the hedonic end of this dimension are student reports of higher frequencies of sexual behavior and drug usage, poor study habits and poor academic achievement, and an absence of specific career goals. Also noted are higher rates of personal problems and subsequent help seeking, disavowal of traditional religious beliefs, negative evaluations of the college experience, higher frequencies of reported stealing and motor vehicle violations, and the more frequent practice of Transcendental Meditation. Students who tend toward the traditional end of this dimension report opposite behavior patterns. From an examination of the loadings, it is clear that sexual intercourse and drug usage emerge as the most consistently strong behavioral patterns on this factor. But such disparate activities as the reported number of weekly study hours, failing a course, ratings of the quality of instruction, and belief in traditional Western religion are also related to this dimension to a substantial degree.

While little change is observed in the pattern of factor loadings within each sex over the three year period, we did note some interesting sex differences in the factor structure. The presence of personal and sex-related problems, subsequent help seeking, masturbation, overall drug use and marijuana use in particular are more critical in defining this dimension among female students.

Attitudes toward scholarship, academic performance and law violations more strongly delineate this factor in males.

## CONCLUSIONS

We did not set out to conduct a comprehensive analysis of college student behavior, nor was it our intention to demonstrate that a unidimensional schema could substitute in all respects for the many sophisticated models of student behavior now in use. Rather, we attempted only to examine the hypothesis that diverse student havior can be meaningfully and usefully construed when viewed from the single perspective described here as hedonism vs. the Protestant Ethic. We believe that the results of our study support this hypothesis, and illustrate the internal consistency of many seemingly disparate segments of college student behavior.

We believe too that these results have both theoretical and practical significance. The notion that diverse behaviors can be meaningfully construed in terms of a single implicit value system is an intriguing one. The theoretical respectibility of an internalized system of values has waxed and waned in personality psychology, and the implications of the present study do not, as a matter of fact, coincide precisely with the authors' customary way of viewing human behavior. But the explanatory utility of such a model cannot be dismissed out-of-hand. We are particularly enthusiastic about the possiblity of developing a standardized measure of this dimension, and of examining the relationship between this factor and some of the personality constructs included in established models.

The important difference between our model of college student behavior and alternative conceptions lies in its proactive nature. Unlike the "hang loose ethic" or even the "non-conformist" subtype, we do not view behavior as a reaction <u>against</u> anything. Rather, it is the central feature of the model that college student behavior is naturally and intrinsically proactive, and motivated, to a greater or lesser degree, by a tendency to maximize pleasure

and garner immediate gratification--the hedonic ethic--, or a tendency to work as hard as possible now to achieve substantial rewards in the future--the traditional Protestant Ethic.

If the validity of this conceptual schema is sustained by further research at other colleges, it can serve as a useful tool to better understand the nature of contemporary student populations, and to assist administrators in directing the course of their institutional development. There can be little doubt about the capability of colleges to establish academic and social environments more conducive to one mode of functioning than the other.

It would certainly be naive to suggest that, even in the limited domain of college student life, a unidimensional theory can account for all of the observed individual variation in behavior. We do conclude, however, that some very useful descriptive, predictive and applied functions can be served by such a model. The conceptual simplicity and utility offered by this schema should be weighed against the complexities of many of the existing multidimensional approaches.

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Table 1

"Hedonic" descriptions of variables of student behavior

| VARIABLE | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 1 | older - higher college class |
| 2 | attended private high school |
| 3 | entered college by transfer - previously attended college elsewhere |
| 4 | selected this college by default - rejected from first choice college |
| 5 | Scholastic Aptitude Test-Verbal Scale score below 600 |
| 6 | did not enter college with a career goal |
| 7 | have no career goal at present time |
| 8 | do not perceive academic program to be career related |
| 9 | do not plan to go on to graduate study |
| 10 | lower number of weekly study hours |
| 11 | failed a college course |
| 12 | placed on academic probation in college |
| 13 | never made Dean's List in College |
| 14 | rate quality of college instruction poorly |
| 15 | rate overall rigor of college academic program as low |
| 16 | rate total college experience poorly |
| 17 | rate integration into college social life as high |
| 18 | practiced Transcendental Meditation regularly |
| 19 | not a believer in traditional Western religion |
| 20 | believe in external chance fate control - external personality orientation |
| 21 | convicted of motor vehicle violation since college admission |
| 22 | stolen something worth $5 or more since college admission |
| 23 | received help for personal-emotional problem prior to college |
| 24 | experienced personal-emotional problem since college admission |
| 25 | received help for personal-emotional problem since college admission |
| 26 | experienced drug-related problem since college admission |
| 27 | experienced sex-related problem since college admission |

Table 1

(continued)

| VARIABLE | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 28 | more drug use prior to college |
| 29 | more drug use since college admission |
| 30 | more drug use during academic year |
| 31 | more jarijuana use during academic year |
| 32 | more alcohol use during academic year |
| 33 | more masturbation during academic year |
| 34 | experienced orgasm during sexual play prior to college |
| 35 | experienced orgasm during sexual play since college admission |
| 36 | engaged in more sexual intercourse prior to college |
| 37 | engaged in more sexual intercourse since college admission |
| 38 | engaged in more sexual intercourse during academic year |
| 39 | engaged in one-time-only sexual intercourse |
| 40 | engaged in sexual intercourse in sustained relationship |
| 41 | (women only) became pregnant since college admission |
| 42 | engaged in homosexual contacts since college admission |

Table 2

Simple first factor loadings* in "hedonic" direction for variables of student behavior

| VARIABLE | MALES | FEMALES |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | .26 | .17 |
| 2 | .15 | .13 |
| 3 | .07 | .17 |
| 4 | .03 | .16 |
| 5 | .07 | .08 |
| 6 | .05 | .09 |
| 7 | .08 | .16 |
| 8 | .23 | .14 |
| 9 | .14 | .12 |
| 10 | .43 | .47 |
| 11 | .33 | .22 |
| 12 | .29 | .17 |
| 13 | .17 | .13 |
| 14 | .23 | .26 |
| 15 | .18 | .18 |
| 16 | .20 | .16 |
| 17 | .17 | .08 |
| 18 | .08 | .11 |
| 19 | .27 | .33 |
| 20 | .00 | .05 |
| 21 | .26 | .17 |
| 22 | .37 | .16 |
| 23 | .04 | .26 |
| 24 | .15 | .28 |
| 25 | .10 | .21 |
| 26 | .29 | .30 |
| 27 | .17 | .36 |

Table 2
(continued)

| VARIABLE | MALES | FEMALES |
|---|---|---|
| 28 | .65 | .66 |
| 29 | .72 | .71 |
| 30 | .64 | .76 |
| 31 | .56 | .71 |
| 32 | .45 | .50 |
| 33 | .12 | .21 |
| 34 | .34 | .24 |
| 35 | .33 | .31 |
| 36 | .48 | .48 |
| 37 | .70 | .73 |
| 38 | .69 | .73 |
| 39 | .34 | .46 |
| 40 | .49 | .50 |
| 41 | --- | .27 |
| 42 | .07 | .00 |

* A factor loading of .07 or higher is required for statistical significance at the 95% level of confidence.